

## Norton Says Change in D.C. Voucher Program Would Destroy It's Low-Income Profile - July 12, 2006

Norton Says Change in D.C. Voucher Program Would Destroy It's Low-Income Profile and Wreck the Program Evaluation

July 12, 2006

Washington, DC—Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) today released a letter that she sent last night to Senators Sam Brownback (R-KS) and Mary Landrieu (D-LA), Chair and Ranking Member of the District of Columbia Appropriations Subcommittee, after learning that, between themselves, they had agreed to support the increase in the poverty level from 200% to 300% for current participants in the D.C. school voucher program. Currently, D.C. families are required to enter the program at 185% of poverty and may remain if their income increases to 200% of poverty. Norton said, "Some Senators seem determined to raise the income limit, even if it means that the program being evaluated is no longer the low-income program the statute mandates. This amendment guarantees that unsubsidized low and modest income families struggling on their own to send their children to Catholic and other religious schools in the District of Columbia will find their children in the same schools with subsidized voucher children." Norton's investigation also showed that raising the income limits would virtually destroy the study.

The full text of Norton's letter follows.

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July 11, 2006

Dear Senators Brownback and Landrieu:

I am writing to recommend a course of action in order to meet two concerns that have been raised by the Washington Scholarship Foundation concerning over-income D.C. families who are being federally funded with private school vouchers, are required to enter the program at 185% of poverty, and may remain if their income increases to 200% of poverty. For participating families, a "technical amendment" has been proposed allowing families to jump to 300% of poverty. The current 200% of poverty standard reflects the low-income mandate of the statute; allows for an increase that is considerably greater than the rate of inflation; is consistent with standards in other federal programs, without which the program probably would not have been adopted; does not displace legitimately low-income families; and best protects the study evaluation because it assures that the achievement of low-income children is what is being evaluated, as the statute mandates. I recommend that the subcommittee maintain this standard.

In spite of the fact that there has been no showing that a change is necessary, if the subcommittee desires to move ahead in any case, no change should be based on an unprincipled, results-oriented standard calculated to simply capture virtually all over-income students without regard to the reason for the increase in family income. A standard less than 220% for families in the study (those in the program for the first two years) would be uniquely liberal for a program that is only two years old. However, at least this standard would relate to a precedent established in the much longer Milwaukee voucher experience, the only comparable program. It is important to note that the Wisconsin legislature raised the percentage to which family income could increase from 175% to a maximum of 220% of poverty, only 15 years after the program began, not two years later, notwithstanding changes in the cost of living, inflation, and other circumstances of recipients. Thus, for the 2-year D.C. program, a figure closer to 200% of poverty should be used if any relaxation of

income requirements is allowed. Moreover, the Milwaukee program was evaluated for five years without any increase in the income limit.

After looking closely at the program, it is clear that increasing the income limit is unnecessary, but using a figure less than the 220% Milwaukee figure would at least meet a number of essential criteria for study participants: 1) The program would remain low-income; 2) A modest increase is more likely to assure that genuine hardship cases are addressed; 3) Federal law resolutely forbids relaxation for hardship of any kind for millions of low-income families who receive comparable education grants, such as Head Start and Pell grants, not to mention those who depend on much more vital programs, such as food stamps and public housing, who must adhere to strict earn-out requirements, regardless of the reason, or leave these programs; 4) Even a modest increase will displace some legitimately 185% of poverty families, and a greater increase will have an undeniably unfair effect on even more low-income families; 5) The study would be more protected by a more modest increase than by allowing most over-income families to be compared with legitimately low-income families and treatment groups; 6) The religious schools in the District have many families with incomes that match the 300% proposal and below, and a substantial increase would be unfair to low and modest income families struggling on their own to send their children to these schools with family incomes of \$39,600 for a family of two, \$49,800 for a family of three, and \$60,000 for a family of four.

After an amicable meeting with Washington Scholarship Fund representatives, I began my study with a bias toward some increase to protect the integrity of the evaluation. However, we found that the evaluation would be harmed not saved by a substantial increase in the income limit because the outcome would be skewed by reflecting substantial numbers of upwardly mobile, modest income families. We found that the study, as now structured, would have children sufficient in numbers to do a valid evaluation. We found that this study, like any well-developed and competent study of this kind, always assumes it must adjust to conditions that arise, and that this study is already making such adjustments. For example, the District changed its required testing regimen and that change is being accommodated.

I do not believe that a serious and substantial income change to a novel and inherently uncontroversial program can be made simply to capture as many students as possible while continuing to claim that the D.C. program is a study on the effects of federally funded private school vouchers on low-income children. For the reasons discussed in this letter, in my letter to you of July 7th and in the request made by Senator Kennedy and me for a GAO study of the program, I have sought a principled way to confront the dilemma you raise. I believe no change is necessary because a well structured and valid study would contemplate the income changes that have occurred and would adjust for them.

As always, I would be happy to discuss the matter further with you. I will try to reach you today.

Sincerely,

Eleanor Holmes Norton